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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 OTTAWA 001862

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [CA](#)  
SUBJECT: HARPER TO OPPOSITION: BRING IT ON!

Classified By: Acting PolCouns Keith Mines, reasons: 1.4 (b) (d)

11. (C) Summary: PM Harper held the first press conference of his tenure to deliver one simple message to the opposition: if you don't go along with the conservative program, you can meet us in the voting booth. In a rare and gutsy move, he laid out the essence of his upcoming Throne Speech - tax cuts, a robust law enforcement agenda, a modest program on the environment, climate change, and arctic sovereignty, and a continuation of the mission in Afghanistan (albeit with a new role). He told the opposition that he would not bow to the "non-negotiable" demands that have been laid out by the Bloc, or negotiate strong amendments to the speech with the Liberals. Harper has long sought a majority in Parliament in order to more fully implement his agenda (described by one astute observer as "incremental conservatism"). With recent gains in Quebec and the leadership meltdown of the Liberal Party, he apparently feels that he has the strength to press his agenda -- governing in a kind of "majority-minority." Whether Canadians would punish him for taking them to the polls remains to be seen, but they do not appear inclined to punish him for his program, which is carefully crafted to appeal to the middle class. End Summary

TIME TO FISH OR CUT BAIT  
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12. (SBU) In 21 months in office Stephen Harper has never held a press conference; it is simply not his style to engage in any back and forth with the fourth estate. So it was a bit of a surprise when the PM convened the press corps for the afternoon of October 3.

13. (SBU) In the course of 50 minutes of questions, he delivered a message outlining the essence of the Throne Speech which will be given on October 16th. It was directed at the opposition but with a parallel appeal to Canadian voters. To the opposition he said "we have tried to listen and tried to adapt our program, where it's realistic to do so, and where it's responsible to do so, to address the demands of the opposition. But there is a fish or cut bait on this. You can't pass the Throne Speech one day and the next day say, 'Well, we didn't actually mean to do it.'" He made it clear that he would not accept the "unconditional demands" of the Bloc Quebecois to the Throne Speech and would not accept a strong amendment to the speech from the Liberals. In essence, Harper said, if the government survives the Throne Speech, it would then consider that it has a mandate to implement the speech, and every major piece of legislation would be a confidence vote.

14. (SBU) To the Canadian voter Harper's message was that he understands their concerns and is working hard to meet them, but he is being thwarted by the opposition at every turn. In the last Parliamentary session the Conservatives put forth a good platform, Harper said, but they were stymied by the opposition. He said does not want to return to a Parliament that cannot get the business of the Canadian people done.

## THE NEW PRIORITIES

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15. (SBU) Harper also laid out the conservative priorities that will be in the Throne Speech. He will push for a deep tax cut, a strong law and order agenda, reasonable measures on climate change and the environment, and the implementation of an arctic defense policy. Many of these were issues that stalled in committee in the last parliament.

## STAYING STRONG ON AFGHANISTAN

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16. (SBU) Significantly, Harper said that Canada would be leaving the door open to a post-February 2009 mission in Afghanistan. Harper conceded that the Parliamentary vote on Afghanistan. Harper conceded that the Parliamentary vote on Afghanistan in 2006 was rushed, but suggested that the opposition was now doing its own rush job in trying to pin the government down early on a mission whose requirements two years from now cannot be known. Citing the "moral responsibility to the Afghan people, the international community, and its own soldiers," Harper said it was hard to imagine Canada leaving Afghanistan "cold turkey" in 2009. Rather, he suggested that the Canadian people "expect we will leave in a responsible manner over an understandable period of time." He also said he may have misspoken earlier when he said that it would require a "consensus" in Parliament to extend the mission -- he clarified that a simple majority would suffice. Finally, Harper kept the door open to staying on in Khandahar itself and not insisting on a safer area, but did suggest, that the mission would change to one of military backed humanitarian assistance, development, and security training.

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## A SUBDUE OPPOSITION RESPONSE

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17. (SBU) The opposition response to date has been somewhat muted, not unexpected given their relatively weak position. The Liberals are low on cash, have not articulated a vision to counter that of the government (other than opposing Stephen Harper), and are having serious leadership troubles. The Bloc was chastened in the Quebec by-election and although it believes it will hold its own in an election, is probably not keen to put its popularity to the test. Only the NDP appears to be doing relatively well, but its low numbers preclude it from playing the key role as the Throne Speech drama plays out. They will all have to figure out how to take advantage of the gauntlet that has now been thrown down, but none will be able to pick up from a position of strength.

## WILL THERE BE AN ELECTION?

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18. (SBU) The key question in all this is "will there be an election?" The most recent Decima poll has all parties about where they were when they last went to the polls -- the Conservatives are at 31 points to the Liberals 29, the NDP is at 16 and the Greens 10. No one has a reason to want an election and given voter volatility all have some reason to fear one, although an optimistic Tory could see the trend moving in their direction.

19. (SBU) Historically, government's have rarely fallen over a Throne speech, even though the procedure of getting the speech through Parliament is rife with opportunities to bring the government down. Commentators and analysts are mixed on how it will play out. After the speech is read on October 16 the opposition parties will propose a series of amendments, starting with a sub-amendment by the Bloc and then moving to an amendment by the Liberals. Each of these is a confidence

motion and given the current numbers in the house the Conservatives need the support of at least one party at each phase to survive. Typically there are a number of side deals made that allow the government to survive.

¶10. (SBU) But Toronto Star columnist Chantal Hebert believes that the way Harper has set this up it will be extremely difficult for the Liberals to simply go along with it. The role of the opposition is to oppose, and if they are forced to concede on a motion they clearly don't agree with, they will look feckless. She believes Harper has set up the country for an election. The contrary view is offered by National Post columnist Andrew Coyne, who believes that Harper is being firm but conciliatory, and means it when he says he does not want an election. In his view Harper is brandishing a piece of his sword, but with an olive branch firmly extended that will only lead to an election if the Liberals continue to overplay their very weak hand.

¶11. (C) The ball is now fully in the opposition's court. According to a PMO staffer, NDP Leader Layton will be able to work with the government as long as there are some concessions to his party along the way; as the smallest of the parties the NDP lives for small victories on the margins and this may be enough. But if the NDP doesn't make a deal, things get dicey. Dion's personality, the staffer said, is more rigid, and he would not be as apt to compromise. It will be even harder for him to do so given recent accusations of weakness. It could, he thought, be a train wreck, and he gives odds of an election as two to one in favor.

¶12. (C) Comment: With all sides revving their engines in what is becoming a fast paced game of chicken, there are no guarantees that the government will survive the Throne Speech, and if it does Harper has set up a system of perpetual volatility for every major piece of legislation. The Liberals can't win at this game -- if they call Harper's bluff they end up in an election they are ill prepared for, and if they go along they appear weak and ineffectual. Either way Harper has considerable wind in his sails and he appears ready to use it. Notably, of the five key issues he has outlined for the next term, only tax cuts are not of direct interest to the United States, so this is a contest that we should keep our eyes on.

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